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Principals' Perspectives of School Librarians

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Research has revealed that the principal's support of the school's library program is critical to its success. For this reason, it is imperative for librarians to understand the principal's perceptions and priorities. This project was designed to determine the criteria that principals in South Carolina, USA use in hiring a school librarian, the competencies principals consider important for a school librarian to possess, and principals' level of satisfaction with the work of their current school librarian. South Carolina's K-12 school principals were asked to participate in the project by submitting an online questionnaire which was completed by 189 respondents. Findings indicate that principals generally supported school librarian competencies as outlined in Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning (the national standards for school library media programs in the USA at the time the survey was conducted). Just over 82% of principals were satisfied or very satisfied with their current school librarian.

Introduction and Background

Most school librarians recognize that support of the principal is critical to the success of the school's library program (Hartzell, 2002a; Haycock, 1995, 1999; Oberg, 1995, 1997, 2006; Todd, 2007). As the school's instructional leader and manager, the principal shapes the school culture, sets expectations for the school's staff, and usually has the final word in budget decisions (Donham, 2008). According to Hartzell (2002a), these activities influence the size and quality of the library collection, the level of collaboration between teachers and the librarian, and the opportunities the librarian has for leadership responsibilities beyond the library media center. For these reasons, the principal's impact on the school's library program is difficult to overemphasize.

Research reveals that successful school librarians enjoy principal support (Baldwin, 1995; Farwell, 1998; Gehlken, 1994; Morris & Packard, 2007; Yetter, 1994). Studies also show that principals do not always appreciate or understand the role of school librarians, most notably their potential impact on curriculum (Cruzeiro, 1991; Hartzell, 2002b; Kolencik, 2001). Conversely, many school librarians believe that principals do not understand and appreciate their role, including their potential influence on teaching and learning (Campbell, 1991; Lewis, 1991).

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A number of studies have examined principals' perceptions of school librarian roles or competencies. The results are not easy to synthesize, however, because the content, organization, and terminology used in questionnaires and interviews are not consistent across studies. Nonetheless, one consistent finding across studies indicates that principals consider activities related to materials provision and reference assistance to be more important than collaboration, planning with teachers, and curriculum development.

Alexander, Smith, and Carey (2003) studied Kentucky school principals' perceptions of school librarians and school library services ten years after the implementation of the state's education reform initiative. Roles and responsibilities of school librarians were organized into five categories: (1) information literacy, (2) collaboration/leadership/ technology, (3) learning and teaching, (4) information access and delivery, and (5) program administration. The researchers found that principals considered information access and information literacy somewhat more important than collaboration/leadership/technology, and program administration the least important activity. The Pennsylvania principals queried as part of Kolencik's (2001) dissertation research indicated that principals perceive the librarian's most important role as providing students with reference and research services followed by library administration. In an earlier study, Dorrell and Lawson (1995) found that Missouri principals gave the highest rating to the following library program functions: materials selection, library management, and providing reference/research services to students. Producing audiovisual materials, curriculum planning, and instruction were found to be of average importance. Likewise, Marcoux (2005) found that the Washington state principals she surveyed had little understanding of the role of the school librarian as it relates to curriculum development and evaluation of student work.

Kaplan (2006) conducted individual interviews with six doctoral students studying educational leadership at a Delaware university to better understand their perceptions of school library programs. As part of the interview, participants were asked to react to a list of factors associated with exemplary school library programs taken from *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (American Association of School Librarians & Association for Educational Communications and Technology [AASL & AECT], 1998), the national standards for school library programs in effect at the time. They were generally positive about the factors which included statements related to staffing, flexible scheduling, role of the school librarian as teacher and instructional partner, the resource collection, collaboration, and the role of the school librarian in the professional development of teachers. But when asked in a follow-up question to identify obstacles to the implementation of exemplary programs, the most serious concern focused not on any technical competence, but rather on the personality of the librarian. The same concern surfaced in a study conducted by Roys and Brown (2004) in which "ability to work with others" was the top rated "quality" used by the school administrators they surveyed in hiring a school librarian.

The relatively low priority principals have for the instructional and curricular leadership role of the school librarian stands in contrast to the findings of several studies which show that collaboration between classroom teachers and librarians can have a positive impact on student achievement (Haycock, 2007; Lance & Loertscher, 2005, *School Libraries Work*, 2008). Part of the reason for this may be related to the fact that little attention is given to the role of the school

librarian or the school library program in principal preparation programs and to the absence of articles related to libraries and librarians in the journals school administrators read (Hartzell, 2002c, Kaplan, 2006, Wilson & McNeil, 1998).

The research reported here is part of a comprehensive review of the University of South Carolina School of Library and Information Science (USC-SLIS) preparation program for school librarians. The primary aims of the project were to gather stakeholder perspectives on the status of the profession and on how well USC's program is preparing a new generation of school librarians. The part of the project reported here was designed: (1) to discover which skills and competencies principals consider important for a school librarian to possess, and (2) to learn how satisfied principals are with the performance of the librarians currently working in their schools. Principal expectations for and level of satisfaction with our graduates were collected to meet accreditation standards and to inform decisions related to program review and revision.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this project:

1. What criteria do principals use in hiring a school librarian?
2. When seeking a school librarian, what competencies do principals consider important?
3. How satisfied are principals with the work of their current librarian?

Context

South Carolina's public school system is made up of 85 school districts and 1,144 schools. In terms of size, the largest school district (Greenville County) has 67,586 students and the smallest (Marion 7) has 738 (South Carolina Department of Education [SCDOE], 2009). School librarians are mandated in all but the smallest schools, some magnet schools, and charter schools. The 1,135 school librarians employed in South Carolina public schools have a strong advocate on the staff of the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE) but only a handful of the 85 districts employ an experienced school librarian whose full-time responsibility is to coordinate the district's school library programs. The state's professional association, the South Carolina Association of School Librarians (SCASL), is active in promoting the state's school library programs and providing professional development opportunities for the state's school librarians.

The state has a systematic program for educator evaluation. ADEPT, South Carolina's system for assisting, developing, and evaluating professional teaching, is based on nationally recognized professional standards for teachers (SCDOE, 2003). The ADEPT system also includes standards and procedures developed specifically for school librarians. Every school district is required to develop a plan for implementing this program that includes training principals to administer the process. South Carolina also has a document that includes standards and evaluation guidelines for school library programs which has been widely promulgated by the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE, 2007).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through an online survey of building-level "head" principals of South Carolina's K-12 public schools. Surveys were created in Flashlight Online, a web-based service

for creating, administering, and analyzing surveys. USC has a contractual agreement with Flashlight Online (housed at Washington State University) that gives faculty and staff unlimited access to this service. Members of an advisory panel (that included a school principal, a district school library supervisor, the state department of education consultant for school libraries, a district level human resources official, and two building level school librarians) and selected School of Library and Information Science faculty participated in the review of drafts of the instrument as it was being developed. Principals were recruited through the South Carolina Association of School Administrators (SCASA). The 785 "head" principals whose email addresses were part of the SCASA membership directory database were emailed a message containing a link to the survey with an explanation of its purpose and a request for participation.

In addition to questions related to school context and principal experience, respondents were asked in closed-ended questions:

- (1) to rate factors used in making hiring decisions as "Very important," "Important," or "Not important,"
- (2) to rate the importance of specific competencies when hiring a school librarian as "Very important," "Important," or "Not important,"
- (3) to rate their school's current librarian as "Excellent," "Good," "Average," or "Poor" on eight areas that are generally accepted as important activities for successful school librarians, and
- (4) to indicate an overall level of satisfaction for the work of their school's current librarian.

In open-ended questions, principals were asked:

- (1) to list the three most important criteria they use for hiring a new librarian,
- (2) to describe areas in which they would like to see their school's current librarian spend more time in order to better serve the school's students and teachers, and
- (3) to share any other priorities they had for their school's library program.

Flashlight Online software computed frequencies and Excel was used to compute a mean for each item. Responses to open-ended questions were analyzed to determine common themes. The data were read and reread several times before each response was analyzed and coded. Concepts that emerged were then organized into categories.

Who Responded?

Of the 785 "head" principals who received the email message with a link to the questionnaire, 189 (24.08%) submitted useable surveys including 122 from elementary school principals, 64 from secondary school principals, 2 from K-12 school principals, and 1 from a principal in a school serving students in grades 3-8. Principals leading schools with between 400 and 800 students made up 56% of total respondents. Only 9% of respondents worked in schools with enrollments over 1,000. Just over 60% of respondents reported that they had held the position of principal for 10 years or less. Almost 80% have held the position of principal in their current school for 10 years or less. Nearly 95% reported that their school librarian was fully credentialed. Only 21.39% reported having completed a school administration course that covered the role of the school librarian, but almost 40% had attended a professional

development session on the role of the school librarian offered by their school district or through the SCDOE.

Findings

Research Question One

What criteria do principals use in hiring a school librarian?

In order to elicit principals' criteria for hiring a school librarian, an open-ended question was included early in the survey before they were asked to rate a series of competency statements gleaned from *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (AASL & AECT, 1998). Specifically, respondents were asked to list the three most important criteria they use for hiring a new librarian. Responses from elementary school principals and secondary school principals were analyzed separately to highlight any differences in their hiring criteria. Of the 189 survey respondents, 153 answered this question (97 from elementary schools and 56 from secondary schools). The content of each response was analyzed for specific hiring criteria. Some included less than three criteria; others included more. The data were read and reread several times before each criterion was coded. Concepts that emerged were organized into categories that clustered around three primary areas: (1) interpersonal and affective factors, (2) knowledge and skills, and (3) pre-employment qualifiers.

Interpersonal skills and other affective factors. The "interpersonal and affective factors" cluster included: (1) interpersonal/people skills, personality, team player, flexibility, (2) communication skills, (3) relationship to students, and (4) other affective or dispositional traits. Interpersonal/people skills were mentioned by 40 elementary school principals and 31 secondary school principals. Typical responses in this category included the following:

- "Ability and personality to work with everyone in the school—personal skills"
- "Working relationship with faculty and staff"
- "Rapport with students/staff"
- "Willingness to work with a team"
- "Collaboration for instruction and services"
- "Strong interpersonal skills"

Communication skills were specifically mentioned by two principals from each level. It is possible that other respondents' thinking about communication skills were subsumed under interpersonal skills. In addition to general comments about "working with students" that were part of interpersonal/people skills, 15 elementary school principals and 9 secondary school principals included a comment that specifically addressed the librarian's relationship to students. For example:

- "A desire to help young people become successful"
- "Love and caring for the middle level child"
- "Innovation for student involvement with the library"
- "A love of children and learning"
- "Rapport with students"

Other affective or dispositional traits that may overlap with interpersonal/personality criteria were mentioned by 19 elementary school principals and 4 secondary school principals.

The 4 secondary school principals mentioned a "caring attitude," "work ethic," enthusiasm," and "creativity." Elementary school principals added "smiles," engaging," dependability," "initiative," common sense," and "resourcefulness."

Knowledge and skills. Responses related to knowledge and skills ranged from the general to the very specific. Of the 153 respondents, 37 elementary school principals and 25 secondary school principals made general comments related to knowledge and skills:

- "Organization and operation of the media center"
- "Familiarity with media programs and systems"
- "Organizational skills"
- "Knowledge and abilities related to the nature of the job"
- "Knowledge of the role of the library media specialist"

Several (27 elementary and 7 secondary) principals offered specific criteria related to knowledge and skills associated with teaching, instructional planning, curriculum, and standards. The 7 secondary school principals' responses related to school librarians' general knowledge of teaching and curriculum. Elementary school principals overall were more specific and called for school librarians who know the curriculum standards (mentioned by 7) and who are familiar with the curriculum at each grade level.

Technology was mentioned by 32 elementary school principals and 21 secondary school principals as a criterion for hiring. Most simply mentioned skill and proficiency in "technology," but a few added "technology integration" or "technology infusion." High on the list of criteria for just over one-third of elementary school principals was knowledge and skills in the area of reading, books, and literacy. Specifically, their criteria included: knowledge of literacy, knowledge of children's literature, knowledge of children's book authors, knowledge of different genres, and knowledge of leveled books. Several described a school librarian who could create and enthusiastically implement reading incentive programs and activities that would motivate children to read. Only 6 secondary school principals included anything connected to books, reading, or literacy among the criteria they use for hiring a librarian but in the closed-ended question that asked specifically about competency in this area for a prospective hire, secondary school principals rated this almost as high as elementary school principals rated it (see Table 3). An additional 8 elementary school principals and 1 secondary school principal referred to media materials more generally in their answers:

- "Knowledge of library media resources/equipment"
- "Ability to assist faculty with research materials"
- "Having an up-to-date collection of resources"
- "Knowledge of current media"

Overlapping both interpersonal/people skills and knowledge and skills were comments from six elementary school principals and four secondary school principals who included innovation and currency among the criteria they would use when hiring a school librarian. For example:

- "Flexible with desire to experiment with new ideas"
- "Knowledge of educational research and current trends"
- "Knowledge of innovative practices"
- "Very creative in thinking about how to offer activities to many students in the school"

Pre-employment qualifiers. Pre-employment qualifiers (offered as criteria by 28 elementary and 16 secondary school principals) included statements related to the process of filling the position with the “right” candidate such as positive recommendations, certification status, and experience. Most comments in this category focused on identifying a candidate fully credentialed as a school librarian.

Factors that impact hiring decisions. Following the first open-ended question, respondents were presented with a list of five factors and asked to consider their importance in hiring a school librarian. Principals across all levels placed more importance on a personal interview, certification status, and positive recommendations than they did on experience (see Table 1). The items on this list corresponded to the “pre-employment qualifiers” that several respondents mentioned in their answers to the open-ended question described above. It is interesting to note, however, that principals did not mention a personal interview when responding to the open-ended question about their criteria for hiring a librarian but ranked it highest in response to the pre-determined list of five factors. School librarian candidates seeking their first position without experience as a classroom teacher or as a librarian should be reassured by the fact that a personal interview, certification status, and recommendations were more important to principals than hiring someone with experience.

Table 1. Factors Important in Making Hiring Decisions

When making a hiring decision to fill a school library media specialist position, how important is each of the following?	N	Mean Rating
Personal interview	188	2.90
Fully certified as a school library media specialist	187	2.82
Positive recommendation from a former employer or professor	188	2.81
Successful experience as a school library media specialist	184	2.32
Successful experience as a classroom teacher	188	2.30

3=Very Important 2=Important 1=Not Important

Research Question Two

When seeking a school librarian, what competencies do principals consider important?

Principals were asked to rate the importance of 19 competencies gleaned from the 27 principles related to the three primary responsibilities of school librarians (learning and teaching, information access and delivery, and program administration) as described in *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1998), the national standards for school library media programs at the time the survey was conducted. Overall, principals agreed that these competencies are important.

Table 2. Average Competency Ratings 3=Very important 2=Important 1=Not Important

Please consider the following competencies and rate how important they are for a library media specialist you would be interested in hiring	N=	Mean Rating	% of “very important” Ratings
Collaborates with teachers to provide students with instruction in strategies such as finding, judging, and using information in support of active, authentic learning	188	2.97	96.81

Collaborates with teachers to integrate the library program and information literacy skills into the school's curriculum	188	2.95	95.21
Builds a collection of up-to-date materials that supports the curriculum and meets the diverse learning needs of students	188	2.94	93.62
Encourages and engages student in reading, viewing and listening for understanding	188	2.92	91.49
Maintains his/her own professional knowledge and skills	188	2.90	90.43
Communicates with school administrators about library media program plans, activities and accomplishments	185	2.87	87.03
Models and teaches ethical and responsible use of information and information technology	188	2.85	85.11
Maintains an attractive and positive learning environment	187	2.85	85.03
Supports the mission, goals, objectives, and continuous improvement of the school through comprehensive and long-range planning	188	2.85	84.57
Plays a leadership role in integrating technology into teaching and learning activities	186	2.81	82.26
Provides instruction in information literacy for all members of the learning community, including teachers and administrators	187	2.80	80.21
Develops plans, policies, and procedures to ensure that all library users have timely and flexible access to library programs, services, and resources, including connections to other types of library and information resources	186	2.80	80.11
Engages in ongoing assessment for purposes of improving the library media program	186	2.79	80.11
Leads collaborative planning and curriculum development activities that integrate the library media program into the curriculum in order to promote student achievement	188	2.79	80.32
Clearly communicates the mission, goals, functions, and impact of the library media program to the school community	187	2.79	79.68
Develops and administers a budget that provides for the purchase and upkeep of all resources necessary to meet the goals of the library media program	185	2.77	77.30
Manages human, financial, and physical resources	186	2.70	69.89
Makes connections between the library media program and the larger community, including parents	188	2.67	67.02
Guards against barriers to intellectual freedom by providing an atmosphere of free inquiry	187	2.51	53.48

Collaboration, collection-building, and encouragement of reading, viewing, and listening were rated highest with over 90% of principals rating these competencies as “very important.” These were the top five competencies for both elementary and secondary school principals. Fewer principals rated “guards against barriers to intellectual freedom,” “making connections to the larger community,” and “managing human, financial, and physical resources” as “very important” (see Table 2). They were the lowest rated competencies of both groups of principals. Very few principals rated any of the competencies as “not important.” The competency that received the most (five) “not important” responses was “guards against barriers to intellectual freedom by providing an atmosphere of free inquiry.” Four of the “not important” responses came from elementary school principals and one was from a junior high school principal. Although “guards against barriers to intellectual freedom” was rated lowest by both elementary and secondary school principals, the elementary school principals’ mean rating was lower (2.45) than the mean rating of secondary school principals (2.59).

Table 3 presents ratings of each competency within the three primary areas of school librarian responsibility (teaching and learning, information access and delivery, program administration) as they are articulated in *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1998). Collaboration with teachers and encouraging reading, viewing, and listening were the top-rated competencies in the teaching and learning category. Building resource collections was the top-rated competency in the information access category. Maintaining professional knowledge and skills, communicating with school administrators, and supporting the school’s mission, goals, and objectives were rated higher than other program administration competencies.

The most notable differences between elementary and secondary school principals were “guards against barriers to intellectual freedom” as noted above, “develops and administers a budget,” and “plays a leadership role integrating technology.” All three of these competencies were rated higher by secondary school principals than they were by elementary school principals.

At the end of this series of competency statements, an open-ended question asked principals what additional competencies they looked for in new hires. Forty-three of the 189 respondents replied to the question. Four of those indicated they had nothing more to add. Of the 39 who did offer additional comments, 24 included something related to interpersonal, communication, or “people” skills. Typical responses included the following:

- “The ability to utilize effective people skills. This is paramount!!!!”
- “Must be an approachable, welcoming person.”
- “Team player, works and gets along with faculty and staff.”
- “Works congenially and collegiality with faculty and staff.”

Two other areas each mentioned by five respondents related to: (1) reading and literature and (2) the school library’s place in the larger learning community. The first area focused on motivating students to read and the importance of the librarian’s love of books and literature. Five principals articulated the role of the school librarian in creating a space that belongs to the entire school program and making it a special place. In a few of these responses, one can detect the possibility that the principal may have had a less than positive experience with a school librarian:

- “Realizes that the media center is the domain of the entire learning community and not his/her space.”
- “Willingness to see the media center as part of the total school program.”
- “Make the media center a relaxing and comfortable environment and not a book museum!”
- “Willingness to go the extra mile to make our media center a special place to learn and work.”
- “A desire to make the media center the heart of the school and a place where students and staff love to come.”

Table 3. Competency Ratings by Category 3=Very important 2=Important 1=Not Important

Please consider the following competencies and rate how important they are for a library media specialist you would be interested in hiring.	N=	Mean Rating (All)	Rank	% of “very important” Ratings	Mean Rating (Elem)	Mean Rating (Sec)
Teaching and Learning						
Collaborates with teachers to provide students with instruction in strategies such as finding, judging, and using information in support of active, authentic learning	188	2.97	1	96.81	2.97	2.97
Collaborates with teachers to integrate the library program and information literacy skills into the school’s curriculum	188	2.95	2	95.21	2.96	2.94
Encourages and engages student in reading, viewing and listening for understanding	188	2.92	4	91.49	2.93	2.91
Plays a leadership role in integrating technology into teaching and learning activities	186	2.81	10	82.26	2.78	2.87
Provides instruction in information literacy for all members of the learning community, including teachers and administrators	187	2.80	11	80.21	2.78	2.81
Leads collaborative planning and curriculum development activities that integrate the library media program into the curriculum in order to promote student achievement	188	2.79	13	80.32	2.78	2.84
Makes connections between the library media program and the larger community, including parents	188	2.67	18	67.02	2.68	2.66

Table 3. Competency Ratings by Category

3=Very important

2=Important

1=Not Important

(Table 3 continued)	N=	Mean Rating (All)	Rank	% of "very important" Ratings	Mean rating (Elem)	Mean rating (Sec)
Information Access						
Builds a collection of up-to-date materials that supports the curriculum and meets the diverse learning needs of students	188	2.94	3	93.62	2.93	2.95
Models and teaches ethical and responsible use of information and information technology	188	2.85	7	85.11	2.84	2.88
Maintains an attractive and positive learning environment	187	2.85	7	85.03	2.83	2.89
Develops plans, policies & procedures to ensure that all library users have timely and flexible access to library programs, services, and resources, including connections to other types of library and information resources	186	2.80	11	80.11	2.78	2.84
Guards against barriers to intellectual freedom by providing an atmosphere of free inquiry	187	2.51	19	53.48	2.45	2.59
Program Administration						
Maintains his/her own professional knowledge and skills	188	2.90	5	90.43	2.88	2.95
Communicates with school administrators about library media program plans, activities and accomplishments	185	2.87	6	87.03	2.88	2.86
Supports the mission, goals, objectives, and continuous improvement of the school through comprehensive and long-range planning	188	2.85	7	84.57	2.86	2.83
Engages in ongoing assessment for purposes of improving the library media program	186	2.79	13	80.11	2.78	2.82
Clearly communicates the mission, goals, functions, and impact of the library media program to the school community	187	2.79	13	79.68	2.79	2.80
Develops & administers a budget that provides for the purchase and upkeep of all resources necessary to meet the goals of the library media program	185	2.77	16	77.30	2.73	2.83
Manages human, financial, and physical resources	186	2.70	17	69.89	2.69	2.71

Research Question Three*How satisfied are principals with the work of their current school librarian?*

Principals were queried about their level of satisfaction with their current school librarian in eight areas emphasized in school library standards found in *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1998) and in the professional literature. Overall, they received high marks from principals. The majority of respondents rated their school librarian as “excellent” or “good” in all eight areas. The traditional roles of “providing an up-to-date collection of resources” and “promoting reading and literacy” received the most “excellent” ratings; “curricular leadership” and “providing professional development for teachers” received the fewest. Elementary and secondary school principals’ ratings for “promoting reading and literacy” and “providing an up-to-date collection of resources” were the same or very close. In the other areas, secondary school principals rated their librarians higher than elementary school principals rated theirs (see Table 4).

Table 4. Rating of Current School Librarian

Please rate your current SLMS on the following:	Total N=	Mean Rating (All)	% of “excellent” Ratings	Mean Rating (Elem)	Mean Rating (Sec)
Promoting reading and literacy	181	3.39	58.01	3.39	3.39
Providing an up-to-date collection of resources tied to the curriculum	183	3.28	51.37	3.28	3.30
Technology competence	183	3.27	49.73	3.15	3.49
Teaching information literacy and research skills	182	3.17	47.25	3.13	3.29
Collaborating with teachers	182	3.15	46.15	3.08	3.32
Technology integration	182	3.06	42.31	2.89	3.37
Curricular leadership	182	2.82	28.57	2.79	2.90
Providing professional development for teachers	181	2.72	30.94	2.61	2.97

4=Excellent 3=Good 2=Fair 1=Poor

At the end of this section of questions, principals were asked how satisfied they were with their current librarian. Half of the 185 who answered this question said that they were “very satisfied.” Just over 32% were “satisfied,” 12.4% were “dissatisfied” and 4.9% were “very dissatisfied.” Although an 82.7% satisfaction rate is commendable, it means that just over 17% of principals responding to the survey are not satisfied with the work of their current school librarian. A slightly greater percentage of secondary school principals reported being “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their current school librarian (see Table 5).

Table 5. Overall Satisfaction with Current School Librarian

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
Elementary principals	46.6%	34.8%	12.7%	5.9%
Secondary principals	57%	29%	11%	3%
All respondents	50%	32.4%	12.4%	4.9%

Areas for More Attention

Following the question requesting respondents to rate their satisfaction with the current librarian, principals were asked (in an open-ended question) to describe other areas or services in which they would like see the librarian spend more time in order to better serve the students and teachers in their school. Of the 189 principals who responded to the survey, 3 reported that they were unable to answer the question because they had recently hired a new librarian. Of the 122 who answered this question, 4 respondents wanted their librarian to spend more time on all eight areas included in the previous set of questions (see Table 4), and 12 expressed complete satisfaction with their school librarians. A few mentioned the fact that more assistance was needed in operating the library:

- “She does it all. I have absolutely no “wants” regarding our LMS. If I wanted anything at all it would be to provide her with help so that she could do everything she wants to do.”
- “My specialist is excellent. However, in such a large school she needs additional help in order to free her up to spend more quality time on the above” [referring to the eight areas in the previous section of the survey]

Most respondents tended to repeat the same language used in the closed-ended questions in which they were asked to indicate the importance of competencies taken from *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1998) or to rate their current librarian on a set of specific set of competencies and best practices. Technology was mentioned by 24 respondents. Most referred to “technology integration,” but a few simply mentioned “technology” and “making it available” or “keeping up with technology.”

Comments related to collaborating with teachers and teaching research skills were each mentioned by 19 respondents. Some simply called for “collaboration with teachers.” Others were somewhat more specific and mentioned “collaborating with more teachers,” or “more active in teacher collaboration.” Only a few specifically used the term “information literacy.” More frequently, respondents called for more activity in the area of “research” such as “basic library reference skills tested on the PACT” [the state’s standardized achievement test], “teaching research skills to provide ELA [English language arts] teachers with the foundation to conduct research projects with students,” and “how to research with texts and the Internet.”

Fourteen respondents mentioned something related to the atmosphere, ambience and use of the library. Four principals specifically addressed more or better “organization” in their answers. Others called for “a more attractive place,” “a more inviting appearance,” “an

atmosphere that invites students to come to the library." Interpersonal skills were once again addressed by just over a dozen respondents. Other areas that were mentioned by over 10 respondents included up-to-date resource provision, promotion of reading and literacy, providing professional development for teachers. It is interesting to note that only five respondents mentioned leadership. Two respondents called for "curricular leadership." "Instructional leadership," "positive leadership," and "leadership among teachers" were each mentioned once.

Finally...

The final question in the survey asked respondents to offer any additional comments they had related to (1) recruitment of school librarians and (2) priorities for the library program in their school. Principals' perspectives about recruitment are reported in another publication (Shannon, 2008). Twenty-five secondary school principals and thirteen elementary school principals answered the second part of the question. Most did not differentiate between the librarian and the library program. Themes that emerged from these responses centered on the following five areas: providing resources (including insufficient funding for materials), ensuring access, creating an inviting environment (including good interpersonal skills), promoting books and reading, and supporting the curriculum. The most notable difference between elementary and secondary school principals was the greater proportion of elementary principals who mentioned reading and literacy as priorities. This was the last question in a long survey so it is not surprising that less than forty answered it. But it is encouraging to note that some of the responses showed thoughtful consideration and insight into the potential of the school library program:

- "If I ever get to hire my own [librarian] instead of working with the one I inherited, the person who be a lover of learning and will make the media center a place all children want to go. Priorities include teaching research skills, providing access to books and other materials, teaching a love of books and literature, supporting the classroom teacher and ensuring that the materials needed to supplement the classroom are there" (from an elementary school principal).
- "I am interested in seeing it [the school library] be a place where anyone can go any time of day. I want it open all the time, available and flexible in its use. I also want to see the librarian working with groups of children as often as possible, sharing good literature, teaching library skills, teaching research skills, teaching about technology, running motivational, incentive programs that children can get into and get something out of. I want parents going in to check out books with their children. I want to see teachers supported in curriculum areas with the librarian helping to meet those needs by making suggestions to them" (from an elementary school principal).
- "Our library media program is in very good shape because our media specialist is recently trained and knows best practices in library media services. She knows that I believe the media center and its activities are the single most important aspect of a school's instructional program and as such, has my support" (from a secondary school principal).

Discussion and Implications

From the Principal's Perspective: Competencies and Qualifications of School Librarians

In the U. S., *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1998) represented the standards or guidelines for best practices in school libraries from 1998 until 2009. The results of this study indicate that the South Carolina principals who responded to the survey agree that the "principles" articulated in the chapters on "teaching and learning," "information access and delivery," and "program administration" represent important competencies for school librarians to possess. It is important to note that a majority of respondents rated every competency as "very important" and that very few rated any competency as "not important" (see Table 2).

In previous perception studies, principals have identified traditional competencies most closely associated with librarianship (e. g., materials selection, library management, and reference/research activities) as the most important for school librarians to possess. Highest on the South Carolina principals list were competencies associated with teaching and learning. On the positive side, three of the four most highly rated competencies were related to the role of the librarian as teacher and instructional partner (see Table 2). Unfortunately, the competency related to leadership in collaborative planning and curriculum development was not rated as high. Results of other studies suggest that "leadership" and participation in curriculum development are not activities that school administrators value as high priorities for their librarians (Kahler, 1990; Schon, Helmstadter & Robinson, 1991). This is unfortunate given the findings of other studies that suggest leadership of the school librarian is critical to the success of resource-based teaching and learning and to the librarian's contribution to reform and restructuring in the areas of curriculum and instruction (Baldwin, 1995; Johnson, 1993; Lumley, 1994; Yetter, 1994). The professional literature is replete with discussion of "teachers as leaders" (See, for example, the September 2007 issue of *Educational Leadership*.) The recently revised *Educational Policy Leadership Standards* adopted by the U. S. National Policy Board for Education recognizes in its set of principles the "collaborative nature of school leadership" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 8). According to McGhee and Jansen (2005), the principal's instructional leadership role should include "empowering others to lead alongside them as part of the educational team" (p. 3). Principals should be looking to teachers (including librarians) to take on formal and informal leadership roles in their schools. In situations where this is not the case, the school librarian will need to be proactive in seeking leadership roles.

Although principals who participated in this study rated "collaborates with teachers to integrate the library program and information literacy skills into the school's curriculum" very high on the list of important competencies, only a few used the expression "information literacy" skills in any of their open-ended responses and those were in response to questions that followed the list of 19 competencies taken from *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1998). Instead, a few mentioned "research" and "finding information on the Internet" as important tasks. In a Texas study of school administrator beliefs about school librarians, Van Hamersveld (2007) made a similar observation. The Texas study participants responded favorably to a specific survey question asking if the library improved students' information literacy skills. But, in responding to interview questions, they made more general comments about research

activities, the use of computers and electronic resources, and were generally unaware of information literacy and its importance to students. It is possible that respondents in the current study and the Texas project included the concept of information literacy together with “technology” since “finding information on the Internet” may be closely related in their minds. School librarians might consider being more deliberate about defining information literacy and describing its relationship to the school’s curriculum and the role it plays in life long learning. Explicitly articulating for the entire learning community how the library program supports teaching and learning, teaches 21st century skills, and contributes to student achievement would be a first step. Perhaps use of the term ICT (information and communication technology) used by the Partnership for 21st Century Schools and the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) would make this connection clear to more teachers and principals.

In open-ended responses to the question asking principals to name their three most important criteria in hiring a school librarian and in a follow-up question asking them to add anything else of importance to the list of 19 competencies from *Information Power* (AASL & AECT, 1998), respondents mentioned interpersonal skills and other affective factors more than factors related to knowledge and skills. The importance of interpersonal and communication skills have been reported as significant in other studies (Kaplan, 2006; Roys & Brown, 2004; Shannon, 2002). Not only are they judged essential by school administrators, interpersonal and communication skills are important factors in facilitating collaborative planning, innovative instructional approaches, and implementation of resource-based learning (Burks, 1993; Farwell, 1998; Hughes, 1998; Johnson, 1993). In the final open-ended question in which respondents were asked to offer additional comments related to their priorities for their library programs, most principals did not differentiate between the librarian and the library program. Given the importance principals place on interpersonal skills, one might argue that the librarian is the library program. According to Vince Barnes, principal at North Elementary School in Noblesville, Indiana, “If the school has an effective library media specialist, then the library media program will be effective” (Harvey, 2008, p. 54). Cultivating positive relationships and engaging in continuous and varied forms of communication with all members of the learning community should be very high priorities for school librarians. Even a librarian who possesses a high level of knowledge and skills will not be able to deliver an effective program if students and teachers are not attracted to work with him or her. The importance of these interpersonal skills suggests that school media preparation programs should make certain that students have opportunities to observe and interact with school librarians who model these kinds of behaviors.

The two competencies that received the fewest “very important” ratings were “connections to the larger community including parents” and “guards against barriers to intellectual freedom.” Still, over half of respondents rated these two competencies as “very important.” Although “connections to the larger community including parents” received fewer “very important” ratings than other competencies, a few elementary school principals included comments related to “the entire learning community” and to “parents checking out books” in their open-ended responses. There was very little difference in elementary and secondary principals’ responses (see Table 3). It is possible that principals associate the school’s connection

to parents with classroom teachers and do not have a vision for the role that the school librarians could play in this area.

Principals may not be clear about the significance of “guards against barriers to intellectual freedom” and the important impact this principle could have on their role as school administrator. Such an impact could be related to challenged materials or access to the Internet. Gibson (2007) points out what can happen when school administrators are unprepared to handle challenges to books and other school materials. He suggests that librarians have a role to play in helping principals manage such situations. It is possible that most of the respondents to this survey have not had to face a challenge to instructional materials and are, therefore, unaware of its significance. Librarians might involve the principal and faculty in “Banned Book Week” activities to raise their level of awareness of the important implications the principle of intellectual freedom has for the entire learning community.

Another area related to this principle is the filtering and blocking of Internet sites. Given the mandate for Internet filtering in K-12 schools in the U. S. by the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA), this is a hot-button issue in school districts across the country. Many educators argue that the filters are overly restrictive and, when set at their most stringent levels, block Internet resources beyond what is required under the law. According to Helen Adams (2008), “filters have a detrimental effect on youthful citizens’ access to information on the Internet and on their intellectual freedom” (p. 54). She suggests that school librarians seek the support of their principals by helping them make the connection between intellectual freedom and ensuring that students are prepared for their roles in a global society through access to both print and electronic information formats (Adams, 2009).

Additional barriers to student access to information can be more subtle and may go unrecognized by principals or even school librarians. In their study of six secondary school librarians in the state of Washington (USA), Myers, Nathan, & Saxton (2007) found barriers to students’ information seeking and learning in the school library. Obstacles included lack of collaboration between classroom teachers and librarian, students’ lack of autonomy, and limited access to resources. School principals who do not understand the role of the school librarian or the importance of physical and intellectual access to information will not recognize that resolving such problems may require their intervention.

From the Principal’s Perspective: Library as Place and Space

There has been much speculation in the popular press and the professional literature about the future of libraries as physical places and how those spaces will evolve. Just over 85% of principals responding to the survey, rated the competency “maintains an attractive and positive learning environment” as “very important.” In their open-ended responses, several offered comments or voiced concerns about the school library as place calling for an attractive and inviting space. Their comments addressed not only the physical setting but also reflected sensitivity to the ambience of the school library. Unfortunately, negative images of librarians that some principals hold are reinforced by their experiences or observations of the library program in their schools. Principals’ comments on the library and its atmosphere are related to their identification of interpersonal and “people” skills as important criteria for hiring. Their

awareness of those elements, including the “personality” of the school librarians, that contribute to a positive climate were apparent in many of their comments.

Recent publications by Loertscher (2008a, 2008b) call for what he refers to as a “radical shift” of focus from school library to “learning commons” the purpose of which is “to showcase the school’s best teaching and learning practices” and to serve as a “hub for all school improvement initiatives” (Loertscher, 2008a, p. 46-47). Here all of the school’s “special” teachers collaborate on creating learning experiences and working with students and teachers and offering professional development for teachers. A few of the principals in this study referred to the library as a space that belongs to the entire learning community and not just the school librarian. It would be interesting to speculate on how they might react to Loertscher’s model for the school library.

Differences between Elementary School Principals and Secondary School Principals

Vast differences exist in the culture of elementary and secondary schools. These include organization, operational practices, relationships among teachers and between teachers and students, educational aims, and goals. For this reason, one would expect differences in how principals perceive and prioritize competencies for their school librarians.

In rating the importance of 19 competencies for librarians they would be interested in hiring, elementary and secondary school principals were in general agreement. The most notable differences were their ratings of the following competencies: (1) “guards against barriers to intellectual freedom,” (2) “develops and administers a budget,” and (3) “plays a leadership role in integrating technology into teaching and learning activities.” In each case, secondary principals rated these competencies higher than elementary principals rated them (see Table 3). Concerns related to challenged materials and objections to blocking Internet sites are more likely to be issues in secondary schools. One could argue that there is more emphasis placed on technology in secondary schools than in elementary schools and that secondary school librarians are more heavily involved in integrating technology into the curriculum than are their elementary school colleagues. It is unclear why secondary school principals would rate “develops and administers a budget” higher than “manages human, financial, and physical resources” since there is obvious overlap between the two competencies.

In rating their current school librarians on eight areas or activities taken from national standards and the professional literature, the level of satisfaction of elementary and secondary school principals for the top two areas (“promoting reading and literacy” and “providing an up-to-date collection of resources”) were the same or very close. But, secondary school principals rated their librarians higher in the other areas than elementary school principals rated their librarians (see Table 4). The most notable differences were principals’ responses to the following areas: (1) technology integration, (2) providing professional development for teachers, (3) technology competence, (4) collaborating with teachers (see Table 4). Here again, the differences in the area of technology appear with secondary school principals rating their librarians higher than elementary principals rated theirs. Secondary school librarians also got higher marks for collaborating with teachers. This might be related to the scheduling arrangements in the majority of elementary schools in the U. S. where school librarians operate

on a “fixed” schedule which means that they see each class on a regular basis during classroom teachers’ “planning” times. As a result, it is difficult for the school librarian to collaborate with classroom teachers during the regular school day. Most secondary school librarians have a flexible schedule which increases the opportunity for collaborative planning between librarians and classroom teachers. Secondary school librarians’ flexible schedules may also contribute to their involvement in providing professional development for teachers. In contrast to most elementary school librarians, they have more control over how they prioritize their activities and how they spend their time.

Conclusion

The school library program’s positive and lasting impact on student achievement will not be realized without a strong partnership between the school’s principal and the school librarian. Understanding principals’ perspectives of and priorities for the library program should help librarians develop a plan for garnering administrative support critical to a successful program.

Emerging from this project is a snapshot of South Carolina school principals’ thinking about school librarian competencies and library program priorities. While it is gratifying to note that overall principals’ rating of the nineteen competencies is very high and that 80% of respondents are either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their current school librarian, their responses to open-ended questions provide important insights into their thinking that will assist building level librarians, school library leaders, and school library educators to look at school library programs through another lens. A principal’s prime source of information about the benefits of the library program is the school librarian in his or her own building (Church, 2008; Hartzell, 2002c). If the principal does not demonstrate an understanding of the potential of the library program on student learning, the school librarian must be proactive in showing him or her how the library program supports school goals and impacts student achievement. McGhee and Jansen (2006) point out that “bringing the principal on board” may be the school librarian’s “most important challenge but well worth the effort” (p. 35).

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